

**Testimony of Abigail St. Lawrence, Montana Association of Churches**

**Proponent of SB 259**

**Testimony to House Judiciary Committee**

**March 12, 2013**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present to you on the growing issue of human trafficking in Montana. The Montana Association of Churches ("MAC") represents over 180,000 Montanans and over 580 individual churches throughout the state in eight Christian denominations: the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Roman Catholic Church, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and the American Baptist Church. One of MAC's top legislative priorities is supporting children and strengthening families. For MAC, this priority includes protecting children from being enticed, encouraged, forced, or permitted to engage in any occupation that would compromise their health or education or interfere with their physical, social, mental, spiritual, or moral development. Human trafficking, particularly for sexual exploitation, certainly compromises all aspects of the victims' lives. SB 259 offers trafficking victims a way to regain their lives.

Although we would prefer to believe that something as horrible as human trafficking isn't happening in Montana, the evidence is to the contrary. Within the last year, Montana newspapers have been strewn with examples of how human trafficking is infiltrating our state. In February 2011, a 12-year-old girl was enticed from her Kalispell home and taken to California for sexual exploitation. A Missoula-based prostitution ring moving young girls around Western Montana was uncovered in May 2012. And just this January, a 14-year-old girl was taken from her Billings home and was found in Joplin, Missouri, having been forced into prostitution.

When women and children are pulled into the world of human trafficking, their futures should not be permanently impaired by involvement in criminal activity through no fault of their own. SB 259 recognizes this and has appropriate sideboards to ensure that the bill truly offers victims, and only victims, of human trafficking a fresh start in life.

Please recommend a "do concur" on SB 259.